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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

Program Aid
Number 1340

Facts About the Food Stamp Program

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This is an equal opportunity program. If you believe you have been discriminated against because of race, color, national origin, sex, age, handicap, religious creed, or political beliefs, write immediately to the Secretary of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.

Revised September 1989

Facts About the Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program provides monthly benefits that help low-income households buy the food they need for good health. You may qualify for food stamps if you:

- work for low wages
- are unemployed or work part time
- receive welfare or other assistance payments, or
- are elderly or disabled and live on a small income.

Under agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, State public assistance agencies run the program through their local offices. The basic rules are the same everywhere.

The amount of food stamps a household can receive is based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Thrifty Food Plan, which is an estimate of how much it actually costs to provide your household with nutritious but inexpensive meals. This cost estimate is revised periodically to keep pace with food prices.

If your household meets the program's eligibility tests, the amount of food stamps you receive will also depend on the number of people in your household and on the amount of monthly income left after certain deductions are subtracted.

For most households, food stamps are only part of their food budgets; they must spend some of their own cash along with their food stamps in order to buy enough food for a month.

For more information contact your local food stamp office. It is probably listed under "Social Services Department" or "Food Stamps" in the State or local government pages of the telephone directory.

Applying for Food Stamps

The food stamp office will give you an application form on the same day you ask for one. You may ask for it in person, over the phone, or by mail; or someone else may get one for you.

The office will accept the form on the same day you turn it in, even if they cannot interview you on that day.

Fill in your name, address, telephone number, and signature on the form and as much other information as you can. Give or send the form to the office as soon as possible. A food stamp worker can help you complete the form during your interview.

YOU MUST ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS COMPLETELY AND HONESTLY. FAILURE TO DO SO CAN RESULT IN DISQUALIFICATION, A FINE, IMPRISONMENT, OR ALL THREE.

If you qualify for food stamps, you will get them no later than 30 days from the date the office received the application.

If your household has little or no money and needs help right away, let the food stamp office know, because you may be able to get food stamps within 5 days. Fill in all of the first page of the application, so a worker can see if you qualify for faster service.

If you are applying for public assistance such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), you may apply for food stamps at the same time in the welfare office.

If you are applying for or receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, you may apply for food stamps in your Social Security District Office, except in California and Wisconsin. People who receive SSI in these States are given cash instead of food stamps.

All other households must apply for food stamps through their local food stamp office.

Having an Interview With a Food Stamp Worker

After you have turned in your application, a worker will hold a private interview with you or another member of your household.

At the interview, the worker will explain the program rules and help you complete any parts of the application that you have not filled out. The worker will also ask you for proof of certain information you have provided. Ask the worker to explain anything you don't understand. It's important that you understand the rules.

Most interviews are held at the food stamp office. If no one in your household can go to the office for an interview, an adult friend or relative who knows your circumstances may go to be interviewed for you.

If you are age 60 or older or disabled and you cannot find someone to go to the food stamp office for you, let the office know. A worker will arrange to interview you at home or by telephone. Other people who cannot get to the office and who have no one to go for them may qualify for a home or telephone interview too.

Meeting Eligibility Rules and Providing Proof That You Are Eligible

Listed below are some of the basic eligibility rules and the kinds of proof you may need during your interview. Your case may be processed faster if you bring the proof with you to the interview.

If you have trouble getting documents or information you need, the worker will help you. If the documents are not available, you may give the name of someone, such as your employer, who can confirm your statements.

Citizenship: U.S. citizens, legally permanent aliens, and certain other legal aliens may qualify. If members of your household are not U.S. citizens, you will have to provide proof of their alien status from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Members whose citizenship is in question cannot qualify for food stamps until proof is obtained that they are U.S. citizens.

Even if some members of your household do not meet the citizenship or alien requirements, those who do may qualify for food stamps.

Social Security Numbers: You will have to provide a social security number for every household member, including children. If any household member does not have a social security number, he or she will have to apply for one. If you are otherwise eligible for food stamps, you can receive them for a limited time while you are waiting for your social security number.

Work Rules: With certain exceptions, able-bodied people between 16 and 60 years of age must register for work, accept an offer of suitable work, and participate in an employment and training program as required by their State's food stamp agency.

Students: Many college students are not eligible to receive food stamps. However, able-bodied students between the ages of 18 and 60 who are enrolled in college at least half time may be eligible if they:

- receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits
- work at least 20 hours a week
- participate in an on-the-job training program
- participate in a Federal work-study program during the school year
- care for a dependent under the age of 6
- care for a dependent between age 6 and 12 when adequate child care is not available, or
- study through a program under the Job Training Partnership Act.

Persons on Strike: Households with persons who are on strike because of a labor dispute are not eligible unless they were eligible the day before the strike and continue to be eligible at the time of application. Eligible households cannot receive a higher allotment because of a decrease in the income of the striking member.

Resources: Under food stamp rules, some resources are counted and some are not. The worker will explain which are counted. All households may have up to $2,000 worth of countable resources. Households may have up to $3,000 if at least one member is age 60 or older. Part of the value of most vehicles is counted as a resource. Some resources that will not be counted are:

- your home and surrounding lot
- household goods and personal belongings
- life insurance policies

Examples of resources that **will** be counted are:

- cash and money in checking and savings accounts
- stocks and bonds
- land and buildings, other than your home and lot, that do not produce income

(Proof: Bank books, bank statements, and other documents.)

Income: Under food stamp rules, almost all types of income are counted. Only households with income at or below certain limits will qualify for food stamps.

(Proof: You must provide proof of the income of all household members. Examples of proof include latest pay stubs or a statement from your employer; benefit letters from Social Security, Veterans Administration, unemployment compensation, or pensions.)

Deductions: After adding all your household's countable income, the worker will subtract certain deductions. The total must fall below certain limits, depending on your household's size, for your household to be eligible for food stamps. The following deductions are allowed for all households:

- a standard deduction
- a 20-percent deduction from the income you earn
- a deduction for the actual costs of dependent care and a portion of high shelter expenses. There is a maximum on the amount of each of these expenses that may be deducted. (Dependent care includes care for

children and disabled adults, if this care is needed so that a household member can work, look for a job, or get training or education leading to a job.)

Households with members who are disabled or age 60 or older may qualify for a deduction for medical costs over $35 a month that are incurred by people who are disabled or age 60 or older. These costs are deductible only if they are not covered by insurance, a government program, or some other source.

Households with elderly or disabled members can also deduct a portion of high shelter costs without being subject to the limit that applies to other households.

(Proof: Bills or records of payments for the following:

- dependent care costs, such as a babysitter, day care center, or attendant for a disabled adult
- rent or mortgage
- insurance on the structure, but not the contents, of a home
- telephone, electricity, gas, oil, water, sewerage, garbage collection, and installation costs for utilities
- medical expenses and proof of any reimbursement, such as an insurance policy or statement from an insurance company or agency paying these bills.)

Finding Out Whether You Qualify

After your interview, the food stamp office will send you a notice.

If you do not qualify for food stamps, the notice will explain why.

If you do qualify, the notice will explain how many food stamps you will get. It will also tell you how many months you can get food stamps before you must reapply.

If you think your application has been wrongly denied or that you have not received the correct amount of food stamps, you should tell the office. If they do not agree, you must ask them to have your case reviewed by a fair hearing official. For more information about fair hearings, see page 9.

Receiving Your Food Stamps

If the office finds that you are eligible, you will get your food stamps no later than 30 days from the date you first applied, unless you qualify for faster service.

Food stamps are issued to households by several different methods. The food stamp worker will explain the methods your local office uses. Eligible households will receive an identification card that they must show when picking up their food stamps. In some areas, this will be a photo ID.

If you are required to pick up your food stamps, but you can't, tell the worker at the time of your interview. You may name someone else to pick them up for you.

Spending Your Food Stamps

You can spend food stamps like cash at most stores that sell food. The cashier may require you to show your food stamp ID.

Food stamps may only be used for food and for plants and seeds to grow food for your household to eat.

Sales tax cannot be charged on eligible items purchased with food stamps.

Food stamps **cannot** be used to buy:

- alcoholic beverages
- tobacco or cigarettes
- household supplies, soaps, and paper products
- medicines or vitamins
- any other nonfood items
- food that will be eaten in the store
- hot foods that are ready to eat, such as barbecued chicken
- pet foods

Food stamps come in booklets. If your food stamps become separated from the booklet cover, keep the cover. Stores cannot accept any food stamps—except for the $1 kind—without a booklet cover.

If the cashier owes you change from a food stamp purchase, up to 99 cents of it can be in coin. Change in even dollar amounts will be given to you in food stamps.

Reporting Changes in Your Circumstances

If you are found eligible for food stamps, you will be given a form for reporting certain household circumstances. You will be told what circumstances to report and when to report them.

You must report changes in your circumstances promptly. You may report changes by calling the food stamp office. However, it is better to fill out the report form and mail it to the office.

IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT YOU REPORT CHANGES, SO THAT YOUR HOUSEHOLD RECEIVES THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD STAMPS. IF YOU RECEIVE ANY EXTRA FOOD STAMPS BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT REPORTED A CHANGE, YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY BACK THE VALUE OF THE EXTRA FOOD STAMPS.

Your Rights

You have the right to:

- receive an application the same day you ask for it
- have your application accepted immediately
- have an adult who knows your circumstances apply for you, if you cannot get to the food stamp office
- have a home visit or a telephone interview if you are 60 or older or are disabled and you cannot find someone to go to the food stamp office for you
- get your food stamps within 30 days after you apply, if you are eligible
- get food stamps within 5 days if you are in immediate need and qualify for faster service
- receive fair and equal treatment regardless of age, sex, race, color, handicap, religious creed, national origin, or political beliefs
- be notified in advance if the food stamp office is going to reduce or end your benefits because of a change in your circumstances that you did not report in writing
- examine your own case file and a copy of the food stamp program rules
- have a fair hearing if you disagree with any action taken on your case At a fair hearing you can explain to a hearing official why you disagree with what the food stamp office has done.

You can ask the food stamp office for a fair hearing in writing, in person, or over the phone. The office will give you information about the hearing rules in your State.

You may ask a friend or relative or anyone else to help you prepare for the hearing and to attend the hearing with you.

In some cases, you can continue to receive your food stamps without a change while you are waiting for the hearing decision.

If the hearing authority decides you are right, you will continue to receive, or will begin to receive, the correct amount of food stamps. If the authority decides the food stamp office is right, you will be asked to repay the value of any food stamps you were not entitled to receive.

Your Responsibilities

- When you apply for food stamps, answer all questions completely and honestly. Sign your name to certify, under penalty of perjury, that all your answers are true.
- Provide proof that you are eligible.
- Report certain household circumstances, and changes in them, promptly to the food stamp office.
- Do not put your money or possessions in someone else's name in order to qualify for food stamps.
- Do not make changes on any food stamp cards or documents.
- Do not sell, trade, or give away your food stamps, or any food stamp cards or documents.
- Use food stamps only to buy eligible items.

PEOPLE WHO BREAK FOOD STAMP RULES MAY BE DISQUALIFIED FROM THE PROGRAM, FINED, IMPRISONED, OR ALL THREE. If disqualified, the first time will be for 6 months; the second time will be for a year; and the third time will be permanent.

Toll-Free Hotline

If you wish to report any instances of misuse, fraud, waste, or abuse of food stamps, you can use this toll-free hotline number: 1-800-424-9121. For persons calling within the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, the number is 472-1388.

☆U.S.G.P.O. 1989-247-911